

Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

"We Can" vs. "We Can't"

NOT LONG after the Cuban missile crisis in October, 1962, President Kennedy was reminiscing about this supreme event of his Administration.

It all seemed easy enough, he remarked, after the Soviet bluff had been successfully called, but the trouble was no one could be sure, at the outset, that the Soviets really were bluffing.

He was asked what he had thought the odds were, at the outset, that the Soviets were not bluffing. He replied that he had thought the chance that the Soviets meant to go through to the end was "somewhere between one in three and even odds."

IT WAS a chilling thing to hear. For if the Soviets had not been bluffing, the Cuban missile crisis would almost certainly have ended in what the military theorists sweetly call a "thermonuclear exchange." And the current Pentagon estimate of the cost to this country of an H-bomb attack is 110 million dead Americans.

In short, President Kennedy very sharply changed the course of history by consciously risking the destruction of 60 per cent of the population of the United States when the risk was at least as high as "one in three" in his sober, carefully considered opinion. He was helped, no doubt, because he was also conscious that if he submitted to the threat of Soviet missiles in Cuba, most of the people whom he led and loved would never forgive such a surrender.



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Every thinking person is grateful, today, for the dead President's willingness to run this fearful risk. Many are perhaps unaware of the Pentagon price-tag above quoted. Many may believe, with the easy wisdom of the rear-view, that the risk was not really "one in three."

But no thinking person can suppose there was no risk at all that the Kremlin would refuse to back down in October, 1962. And no thinking person can suppose that the thing risked—an H-bomb attack—would have been anything but unimaginably awful. All the same, there is unanimity that Mr. Kennedy did right.

THESE facts provide the context in which to judge the sharp turn that events have taken in the last forty-eight hours. As these words are written, it is not known whether the President has merely ordered another demonstration, like the one after the trouble in the Gulf of Tonkin; or whether he has at last decided to do whatever may be needed to avert defeat in South Viet-Nam.

It is not known, in other words, whether he has finally decided to act upon the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his Ambassador in Saigon, Gen. Maxwell Taylor. But whether this is another fruitless one-shot stunt, or whether the President now means business at last, it is worth fitting the reason for his long indecision into the context already provided above.

Previously he has rejected the Joint Chiefs' advice and has done less than Maxwell Taylor wanted done, even at the time of the Gulf for sterner action against the North Vietnamese aggressors has been presented to the President, he has asked for absolute guarantees that

such action would not lead to "another Korea." And the guarantees have not been given, because they could not be given with honesty.

THE MEMORY of the proudest episode in this country's proud postwar history as burden-bearer of the free world has in fact paralyzed our highest councils instead of inspiring them.

The practical political reasons why this has happened—the narrow murmurings of Sen. Richard Russell, the President's own memories of the opposition's squalid post-Korea behavior, and so on and on—hardly need emphasis.

What needs emphasis is the bizarre lunacy of the people who insist we can quite properly do what we did in October, 1962, whereas we cannot again do what we did in Korea. The figures speak for themselves. In October, 1962, President Kennedy took a substantial risk of 110 million casualties in this country. The Korean War was hard and cruel as well as proud, but it cost us, in dead and wounded, only 137,000 casualties.

Those men fell to defend all that had been defended and gained for their country by those who fell at Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal and Saipan—who also numbered less than 300,000. Where then is our common sense, that we shrink and fall back and shrink and fall back, until the lives of millions must again be risked?

We have waited overlong. With Kosygin at Hanoi, the danger is far greater than it was not so very long ago. But the choice is the same, and the figures are the same, and the price of failure is the same.